**Building Phonological Awareness in English as a Second Language Students**

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EDLD 5398 Action Research

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April 15, 2013

**Phonological Awareness**

**Introduction/Background**

This research project covers phonological awareness skills at Rolling Hills Catholic School in San Antonio, Texas. Rolling Hills (RHCS) is a private, parochial school. The school has approximately 230 students in Pre-Kindergarten through 8th grades. Roughly 40% of the students are Mexican nationals who speak Spanish as their primary language. Some students have been attending RHCS for several years, while others are new to the school and the United States. When previewing the student records for initial research questions, considering ethnicity and cultural and linguistic background seemed to be very important. RHCS students are predominately White of Hispanic origin (63%), while the remaining population is White, not of Hispanic/Latino origin (26%), Asian (>1%) and African-American (>1%). However, focusing on the student ethnic makeup did not seem to be the best way to go. Rather, the students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds seem to have more of an impact on their reading levels and phonological awareness skills.

The Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten students who were classified as Limited English Proficiency or as Mexican nationals showed lower levels of achievement on the phonological awareness assessment and the formal and informal reading assessments than their non-Spanish speaking peers. These records indicate that length of time (if less than 5 years) in the United States did little to affect the outcome of assessment scores, and records spanning over 5 years of student assessments show that this gap in skills has been an ongoing problem. The primary barrier seemed to be language based. After reviewing the scores of 1st and 2nd graders, it was discovered that they, too, had the same results.

This dissemination of this information generated much discussion, some of which was heated, among the lower school teachers. The question that kept coming up and was the center of most of the debate was "Is this the result of a poor or lacking Language Arts curriculum or just a difference in the language backgrounds of the students?" After much consideration, it was decided that the curriculum focused heavily on sight words, reading strategies and writing but was not strong in phonics. The curriculum was revised to incorporate a much more whole language approach to reading and writing, with an emphasis on phonological awareness in the lower grade levels. The purpose of this revision is to see how cultural and linguistic differences can impact academic development and success. The hope is to find a more balanced approach to instruction of ESL students.

The evaluation of the revised curriculum and instructional approach will benefit all Rolling Hills students, as well as the Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten teachers. The knowledge gained from this research will benefit all Rolling Hills teachers by helping to understand how differentiated instruction helps students of different backgrounds and ability

**Literature Review**

Phonological awareness is the association of sound to symbols and to the sound structure of language. Wagner and Torgesen define phonological awareness as "the awareness of and the access to the phonology of one's language" (p. 192). The focus is shifted from the meaning of words to the sound of words and to units of speech (phonemes). Understanding the concept of phonological awareness and achieving a level of some mastery or skill has been shown to impact later success in reading, writing and spelling. (Yopp and Yopp, p 2).

Areas of phonemic awareness are rhyme, alliteration, onsets and rimes, syllables and blending and breaking down sounds in words. These areas can be taught using many different activities and can often be taught with songs, rhymes and games. When working with ESL students it is also important to remember to use picture cues, modeling and opportunity to practice in addition to direct instruction. Also, involving families is another important way to help children develop their language and phonological awareness skills. Giving parents ideas of different activities to use at home can help bridge school and home. Other ways to help parents be actively involved is by having the parents visit the classroom to observe lessons, sending home a list of books to read, or giving ideas of different games that can be played at home or in the car. (Yopp and Yopp, p. 8). It is important for the student to practice at home and practice can be something as simple as playing a rhyming game while in the car on the way to school. Giving the parents a list of helpful websites and/or articles provides the parents with additional resources.

Research clearly shows that instruction that focuses on the development of phonemic awareness directly impacts a child's success in reading and writing in later years (Adams, M., Foorman, B., Lundberg, I., Beeler, T.). However, some students might struggle with phonological awareness, putting them at risk for reading difficulties. According to Teresa Quiroga, "phonological awareness predicted phonological awareness in English and English word reading." (www.sciencedirect.com). Therefore a student that can understands sounds and sound units in his or her native language may be able to transfer these skills when learning a new language. However, ELLs that lack experience with the English language may not be able "to distinguish sounds that differ from those of their native language." (Irujo, 2007). It is not so much that they do not have the basic skills of phonological awareness. Certainly, once they develop those skills in their native language, they will be able to transfer these skills to any new language learned. However, they will need explicit instruction in the sounds of the English language in order to get a good grasp of the language. A lack of understanding of English language sounds will lead to poor development in reading and writing in English. "Phonics can be problematic because ELLs often have difficulty discriminating between similar sounds, and because the English language does not have a regular system of correspondence between letters and sounds." (Irujo, 2007).

**Action Research Design**

**Subjects:**

My target population for this research is Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten teachers and parents of Pre-K and Kinder students. The sample of students were the 2 sub-groups of Kinder and Pre-K students: ESL students and native English speakers.

**Procedures:**

Initially, I looked at prior years' TPRI scores to get a baseline data, and I divided the information by my sub-groups. TPRI shows the levels (developing or developed) of students in segmenting and blending words, rhyme (1-hear rhyming words and 2-make rhyming words), alliteration, syllables and listening skills. These scores were for the prior 5 years and were not the scores of the study group. However, it was important to see how Rolling Hills students performed overall as a function of language differences and/or lack of adequate literacy program at the school.

Next, the students for the current year (2011-2012) were identified. These students were further divided into the subgroups for the study (native English speakers and ESL students). Collaboration with the Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten teachers was crucial. These teachers worked together to develop a literacy approach that included a strong phonemic awareness component as well as a language rich environment. They worked hard to create a program that would address the needs of all of their students. Regular informal observations and assessments were made and the information was shared with all. In addition, the TPRI, which is a formal assessment, was administered three times during the year (beginning, middle and end of year).

TPRI scores were reviewed as the assessment was given and data from other observations was gathered. The data was analyzed by overall achievement/level of all Pre-K and Kinder students, then by the different subgroups. This analysis was compared to the baseline created by the collection of information from previous years' assessments. Teachers were an important part in the process of data analysis. With each formal assessment, the teachers looked for patterns, expressed concerns and made suggestions. The literacy program was adjusted as deemed necessary.

This was done for all three administrations of the TPRI. At the end of the year, the teachers reviewed how the different subgroups performed and were able to assess whether or not the inclusion of a stronger phonological awareness component helped the English Language Learners. Did the current year's students perform better than their peers in previous years? I A comparison was made between the 2011-2012 scores and the 2010-2011. The data showed improvement, so the decision was made to continue the research project and implementation of the new literacy program for the 2012-2013 school year.

**Data Collection:**

Test scores from 2011-2012 were gathered and compared to scores from the 2010-2011 scores.

**Findings:**

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| **2010-2011 October** | **Listening** | **Rhyming I** | **Rhyming II** | **Alliteration** | **Sentence Segmenting** | **Syllables** | **Onset Rime** |
| **ELL**  **(19 students)** | **9%** | **13 %** | **0%** | **11%** | **4%** | **19%** | **12%** |
| **Native English Speakers**  **(34 students)** | **73%** | **81%** | **57%** | **53%** | **49%** | **58%** | **41%** |

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| **2010-2011**  **January** | **Listening** | **Rhyming I** | **Rhyming II** | **Alliteration** | **Sentence Segmenting** | **Syllables** | **Onset Rime** |
| **ELL**  **(19 students)** | **47%** | **34%** | **29%** | **26%** | **19%** | **45%** | **12%** |
| **Native English Speakers**  **(34 students)** | **93%** | **93%** | **83%** | **71%** | **57%** | **69%** | **66%** |

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| **2010-2011**  **April** | **Listening** | **Rhyming I** | **Rhyming II** | **Alliteration** | **Sentence Segmenting** | **Syllables** | **Onset Rime** |
| **ELL**  **(19 students)** | **63%** | **60%** | **56%** | **57%** | **73%** | **60%** | **46%** |
| **Native English Speakers**  **(34 students)** | **100%** | **100%** | **94%** | **94%** | **95%** | **96%** | **90%** |

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| **2011-2012**  **October** | **Listening** | **Rhyming I** | **Rhyming II** | **Alliteration** | **Sentence Segmenting** | **Syllables** | **Onset Rime** |
| **ELL**  **(22 students)** | **33%** | **25%** | **8%** | **35%** | **28%** | **28%** | **38%** |
| **Native English Speakers**  **(38 students)** | **73%** | **78%** | **46%** | **58%** | **48%** | **64%** | **48%** |

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| **2011-2012**  **January** | **Listening** | **Rhyming I** | **Rhyming II** | **Alliteration** | **Sentence Segmenting** | **Syllables** | **Onset Rime** |
| **ELL**  **(22 students)** | **53%** | **46%** | **70%** | **64%** | **56%** | **56%** | **54%** |
| **Native English Speakers**  **(38 students)** | **87%** | **86%** | **86%** | **82%** | **78%** | **80%** | **56%** |

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| **2011-2012**  **April** | **Listening** | **Rhyming I** | **Rhyming II** | **Alliteration** | **Sentence Segmenting** | **Syllables** | **Onset Rime** |
| **ELL**  **(22 students)** | **100%** | **100%** | **87%** | **87%** | **84%** | **86%** | **84%** |
| **Native English Speakers**  **(38 students)** | **100%** | **100%** | **90%** | **90%** | **90%** | **90%** | **90%** |

**April 2010-2011 scores compared to April 2011-2012 scores**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Listening** | **Rhyming I** | **Rhyming II** | **Alliteration** | **Sentence Segmenting** | **Syllables** | **Onset Rime** |
| **ELL** | **+37** | **+40%** | **+33%** | **+30%** | **+11%** | **+26%** | **+38%** |
| **Native English Speakers** | **+0%** | **+0%** | **-4%** | **-4%** | **-5%** | **-6%** | **+0%** |

**Conclusion:**

After collecting and analyzing data, it became apparent that understanding the differences in language backgrounds and providing instruction that addresses the language needs of ELLs is important. The research showed that the literacy program at Rolling Hills was lacking the phonics component that proved to be very helpful when teaching ELL students. Significant improvements were made and it was noted that the gap between the 2 subgroups had all but closed. Continued evaluation of the literacy program, differentiated instruction and the implementation of other ESL strategies will be helpful.

**Recommendations:**

The results of the research show great improvement in student test scores. However, it is important to continue to routinely evaluate the literacy program. Continuing to provide explicit instruction in phonological awareness and to provide a language rich environment is essential to continued success. Furthermore, it is suggested that teachers receive professional development training in Sheltered Instruction and other ESL strategies. Finally, continued inclusion of the families in practice and instruction is recommended to help provide an additional support for the students.

**References**

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